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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 005863

PARIS FOR ALLEGRONE; LONDON FOR TUELLER
ROME PLEASE PASS TO VATICAN

E.O. 12356: DECL:OADR
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SUBJECT: (S)ELECTING A LEBANESE PRESIDENT IN 1995: A
CURTAIN-RAISER

11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

12. SUMMARY: VIRTUALLY EVERY PROMINENT MARONITE POLITICAN IN LEBANON (AND IN PARIS) HOPES TO SUCCEED PRESIDENT HRAWI, WHOSE TERM IS SET TO EXPIRE IN NOVEMBER 1995. FURIOUS JOCKEYING HAS BEGUN, AND A DIZZYING ARRAY OF POSSIBLE SCENARIOS EXISTS, BEGINNING WITH AN EXTENSION OF HRAWI'S TERM. THE FATE OF THE PEACE PROCESS IS WIDELY VIEWED AS A KEY DETERMINING FACTOR. THE LEBANESE HISTORICAL REFLEX TO SEEK FOREIGN BACKERS WILL MARK THE 1995 PROCESS: SYRIA WILL BE THE MAIN PLAYER, BUT CANDIDATES ARE ALSO SEEKING U.S., FRENCH, SAUDI, AND VATICAN SUPPORT. AS OF NOW, HRAWI, LAF COMMANDER EMILE LAHOUD, AND FORMER AMBASSADOR TO THE U.S. NASSIB LAHOUD ARE THE FRONT-RUNNERS. THE PRINCIPAL USG INTEREST SHOULD BE IN URGING THE SELECTION OF A PRESIDENT WITH ACROSS-THE-BOARD CREDIBILITY, BUT IN PARTICULAR WHO CAN HELP STEER THE MARONITES TOWARD POSITIVE PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL POLITICAL LIFE. SEPTTEL REPORT WILL "HANDICAP" THE MOST PROMINENT CONTENDERS. END SUMMARY.

A PRESIDENT IN EVERY MARONITE'S MIRROR

13. THE SIX-YEAR TERM OF ILYAS HRAWI IS SLATED TO EXPIRE IN NOVEMBER 1995, AT WHICH TIME PARLIAMENT WILL SELECT A SUCCESSOR. SHI'I NABIH BERRI AND SUNNI RAFIQ HARIRI BOTH HOPE ONE DAY TO BE THE FIRST MUSLIM PRESIDENT OF LEBANON, BUT NOBODY PREDICTS THAT THE NEXT PRESIDENT WILL BE ANYTHING OTHER THAN A MARONITE.

14. THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF WOULD-BE SUCCESSORS IN THE MARONITE COMMUNITY. AT A RECENT SOCIAL EVENT FOR PARLIAMENTARIANS, A DRUZE MP ILLUSTRATED THE POINT WHEN HE TOASTED "TO THE NEXT PRESIDENT IN OUR MIDST--ALL SIX OF THEM." THE LIST OF MARONITE "WANNABES" BRIDGES THE GAP BETWEEN THOSE WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE 1992 ELECTIONS AND THOSE WHO BOYCOTTED THE PROCESS, AND RUNS THE SPECTRUM FROM VIRULENT ANTI-SYRIANS TO THE SHAMELESS SURROGATES OF DAMASCUS. IN ADDITION TO THE SURFEIT OF WOULD-BE LEADERS IN THE COUNTRY, SUCH EXILES IN PARIS AS RAYMOND EDDE, AMINE GEMAYEL, AND MICHEL AOUN WANT TO EITHER GAIN THE PRIZE OR PLAY KINGMAKER.

THE SYRIAN ROLE, AS USUAL, KEY

15. REGIONAL REALITIES AND THE PRESENCE OF A PRO-SYRIAN MAJORITY IN THE LEBANESE PARLIAMENT ASSURE THAT SYRIA WILL HAVE THE DOMINANT VOICE IN THE SELECTION OF A NEW PRESIDENT. TO DATE, THE SARG HAS NOT TIPPED ITS HAND ABOUT ITS PREFERENCES. IN LEBANON, IT IS ASSUMED THAT THE PRESIDENTIAL SUCCESSION WILL BE CLOSELY TIED TO THE PEACE PROCESS, AND THAT THE SARG WILL CALCULATE ITS INTERESTS AS NEGOTIATIONS WITH ISRAEL PLAY THEMSELVES OUT.

16. EVEN THE MARONITES NOW JOCKEYING FOR POSITION BELIEVE

THAT THE SYRIAN STRATEGY WILL BE TO LET THE CANDIDATES STRATCH, JOSTLE, AND ELBOW EACH OTHER TO THE POINT OF IMPASSE, AT WHICH POINT "BIG BROTHER" WILL STEP IN TO "HELP" THE LEBANESE SORT OUT THEIR SELF-MADE MESS. IN THE MEANTIME, DAMASCUS WILL HOST A CONSTANT STREAM OF CANDIDATES WHO SALLY ACROSS THE BORDER IN HOPE THAT ASAD WILL GIVE A FAVORABLE WORD, WINK, OR NOD.

THE U.S. ROLE: DIFFERENT SCENARIOS

¶7. IT IS AXIOMATIC AMONG LEBANESE THAT THE USG WILL PLAY A KEY ROLE, EITHER ACTIVE OR PASSIVE, IN THE MAKING OF THE NEXT PRESIDENT. USG DRUTHERS ARE JUDGED TO BE DEPENDENT ON THE PEACE PROCESS. THOSE WHO BELIEVE THAT THE U.S. PLANS TO "SELL OUT" LEBANON FOR THE SAKE OF A SYRIAN-ISRAELI PEACE AGREEMENT FEAR THAT THE SARG AND THE USG WILL COOPERATE TO CREATE A LEBANESE QUISLING WHO WILL FAITHFULLY EXECUTE SYRIAN DIKTAT.

¶8. A MORE POSITIVE SCHOOL OF THOUGHT BELIEVES THAT THE USG, AT AN APPROPRIATE MOMENT, SHOULD URGE THE SARG TO EXERCISE ITS INFLUENCE TO GUARANTEE THE SELECTION OF A PRESIDENT WHO HAS A DEGREE OF CREDIBILITY ON ALL SIDES. THEY HOPE THAT DAMASCUS WILL BE SUFFICIENTLY BROAD-MINDED TO SEE THE NEED FOR A UNIFYING FIGURE, IN PARTICULAR SOMEONE WHO CAN LEAD THE MARONITES TOWARD POSITIVE PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL POLITICAL LIFE. SUCH SYRIAN ALTRUISM, HOWEVER, WOULD IN THEIR ESTIMATION BE DEPENDENT ON A SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME OF THE PEACE PROCESS.

¶9. THE MARONITE HARD CORE HOPES THAT A BREAKDOWN OF THE PEACE PROCESS WILL SOMEHOW LEAD THE USG (AND ISRAEL) TO SUPPORT A VOCAL OPPONENT OF SYRIA. THEY HOPE TO MOBILIZE MARONITE COMMUNITIES IN THE U.S. TO PRESSURE THE ADMINISTRATION TO SUPPORT "THE LEBANESE POWER OF DECISION" -- WHICH IN THEIR CIRCLES MEANS RESTORING UNRIVALED MARONITE DOMINANCE.

OTHER PLAYERS: FRANCE, SAUDI ARABIA, THE VATICAN

¶10. MANY MARONITES ARE HOPING THAT FRANCE WILL INVOLVE ITSELF IN THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE BY URGING SYRIA OR THE USG IN A PARTICULAR DIRECTION, OR, IN SOME FEVERED IMAGININGS, BY RESUMING THE ROLE OF GUARANTOR OF MARONITE POWER. THOSE MARONITES WHO MAKE THE PILGRIMAGE TO FOGGY BOTTOM SEEKING USG BLESSING USUALLY STOP OFF IN PARIS TO PRACTICE THEIR PITCH. THEORIES OF FRENCH PREFERENCES VARY WILDLY -- FROM BACKING AOUN AND "MARONISME" TO SELLING OUT CHRISTIAN INTERESTS FOR THE SAKE OF CEMENTING WIDER FRENCH INTERESTS IN THE ARAB WORLD. IN PARTICULAR, MANY MARONITES FEAR THE WARM RELATIONS BETWEEN JACQUES CHIRAC AND SUNNI PRIME MINISTER HARIRI.

¶11. SAUDI ARABIA IS ALSO SEEN AS HAVING A ROLE TO PLAY, BUILDING ON ITS EXISTING RELATIONSHIP WITH HARIRI. SOME SPECULATE THAT RIYADH WILL POUR MONEY INTO LEBANON -- OR EVEN SYRIA -- TO SUPPORT HARIRI'S FAVORITE MARONITE, OR THAT, CONVERSELY, HARIRI WILL BE GIVEN INSTRUCTIONS WHOM TO SUPPORT. MOREOVER, ONE PROMINENT CANDIDATE, NASSIB LAHOUD, HAS INDEPENDENT TIES TO RIYADH (SEPTTEL). SOME EXPECT THE USG TO URGE THE SAUDIS TO SUPPORT ITS FAVORED CANDIDATE.

¶12. PUNDITS EXPECT THAT THE VATICAN, THROUGH THE INFLUENCE IT MIGHT EXERCISE ON THE MARONITE PATRIARCH AND THUS HIS CHURCH, WILL INVOLVE ITSELF DEEPLY. THEY SEE THE ELEVATION OF PATRIARCH SFAYR TO CARDINAL AS A SIGN OF VATICAN INTEREST IN GUARDING CHRISTIAN "RIGHTS." THE HARD CORE HOPES THAT THE POPE WILL PRESSURE THE USG AND FRANCE TO SUPPORT A "NATIONALIST"; MODERATES HOPE THAT THE VATICAN WILL STRONGLY URGE MARONITES TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICAL LIFE; SOME BELIEVE THAT PAPAL NUNCIO PUENTE'S ONGOING DIALOGUE WITH HIZBALLAH LEADER FADLALLAH WILL HELP PRODUCE A PRESIDENT WITH BROAD CREDIBILITY. PUENTE SAYS THAT, HEALTH PERMITTING, THE POPE WILL VISIT LEBANON IF A PEACE AGREEMENT IS REACHED: IF THE VISIT HAPPENS, LOCAL

EARS WILL BE KEEN TO SIGNALS OF A VATICAN PRESIDENTIAL PREFERENCE.

THE MUSLIM CONTRIBUTION

¶13. MOST PRESIDENTIAL MANEUVERING, OF COURSE, IS A STRICTLY MARONITE GAME. MUSLIMS--SHIA, SUNNI, AND DRUZE--ARE RELEGATED TO SECONDARY ROLES: EITHER TO BE THE GREEK CHORUS IN PARLIAMENT TO ECHO THE WISDOM RECEIVED FROM DAMASCUS, AND/OR TO STRIKE DEALS WITH MARONITE HOPEFULS TO OBTAIN THE POSITIONS TO WHICH MUSLIMS AT THIS POINT CAN ASPIRE. MUSLIM LEADERS ALREADY HAVE BEGUN CAUTIOUSLY TO ALIGN THEMSELVES, AS OFTEN AGAINST AS FOR A PARTICULAR MARONITE. UNTIL NOW, THE HIZBALLAH SHI'A HAVE NOT DISCUSSED THE RACE OPENLY: INSTEAD, THEY ARE PREOCCUPIED WITH WHAT SYRIA, AND PERHAPS IRAN, HAVE IN STORE FOR THEM AFTER PEACE WITH ISRAEL.

EXTENSION FOR HRAWI?

¶14. IN THE LAST FEW MONTHS, THERE HAS BEEN DISCUSSION OF A CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT THAT WOULD ALLOW PRESIDENT HRAWI TO EXTEND HIS TERM BY PERHAPS TWO YEARS. DESPITE PUBLIC DISAVOWAL OF THE IDEA, HRAWI IS WORKING TOWARD THIS GOAL BEHIND THE SCENES. HE APPARENTLY WANTS TO BE SEEN AS THE PRESIDENT WHO TOOK OFFICE IN THE MIDST OF TURMOIL, THEN PRESIDED OVER A PERIOD IN WHICH LEBANON ENDED ITS CIVIL WAR, MADE PEACE WITH ISRAEL, THEN PUT ITSELF ON THE PATH TO ECONOMIC REVIVAL. WE HAVE ALSO DETECTED WHAT MAY BE A NASCENT EFFORT BY HRAWI TO BOOST HIS DOMESTIC CREDIBILITY BY PUTTING A BIT OF DAYLIGHT BETWEEN HIMSELF AND DAMASCUS.

¶15. THE LEBANESE SAY THAT THE SYRIANS HAVE SENT CONFLICTING SIGNALS ON THE ISSUE OF EXTENSION, AND THAT THE ISSUE MAY DEPEND ON THE FATE OF THE PEACE PROCESS. THE THINKING IS THAT, IF THE PROCESS STALLS, HRAWI WOULD REMAIN IN OFFICE, AND THE QUESTION OF THE PRESIDENCY, LIKE SO MANY OTHER ISSUES, WOULD REMAIN BLOCKED UNTIL THE SHAPE OF REGIONAL POLITICS BECAME CLEAR.

¶16. THERE ARE CONFLICTING REPORTS ON HOW PM HARIRI, SPEAKER BERRI, AND OTHER GOL FIGURES VIEW AN EXTENSION OF HRAWI. HARIRI AND BERRI DISLIKE HRAWI, BUT FEAR THAT A NEW, STRONGER PRESIDENT COULD JEOPARDIZE THE PREROGATIVES THEY HAVE BEEN ABLE TO CARVE OUT. PREDICTABLY, TO THE EXTENT THAT AN EXTENSION OF HRAWI WOULD ALSO HELP FREEZE THEM IN PLACE, THE IDEA IS ATTRACTIVE. IN THE ULTIMATE ANALYSIS, THEY WILL WAIT FOR SYRIA'S DEFINITIVE SIGNAL ON THE ISSUE.

¶17. INTERESTINGLY, THERE ARE VIRULENT OPPONENTS OF BOTH HRAWI AND SYRIA WHO SUPPORT AN EXTENSION. THEIR THINKING IS THAT THE ENEMIES OF SYRIA SHOULD CONCENTRATE THEIR EFFORTS ON THE 1996 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, SEEKING INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS AND GUARANTEES. THE NEW, PRESUMABLY LESS SYRIAN-INFLUENCED PARLIAMENT WOULD THEN ELECT A PRESIDENT UNDER LESS SYRIAN SWAY.

THE USG INTEREST

¶18. THE USG'S VERY ACTIVE, UNSUCCESSFUL SUPPORT IN 1988 FOR MIKHAEL DAHER PROVIDES A CAUTIONARY LESSON FOR THE 1995 PRESIDENTIAL SELECTION PROCESS. ACTIVE USG BACKING FOR A PARTICULAR CANDIDATE WOULD PROBABLY SET IN MOTION A SERIES OF REACTIONS THAT WOULD DAMAGE THE CHANCES OF "AMERICA'S CHOICE." THAT SAID, IT WOULD BE ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE FOR THE USG TO KEEP SILENT ABOUT THE SELECTION PROCESS: IF EXTENSION OF HRAWI REMAINS A LIVE ISSUE, WE WILL BE ASKED AT LEAST FOR COMMENT. IF A NEW PRESIDENT IS TO BE CHOSEN, WE WILL BE ASKED FOR OUR INPUT EVERY STEP OF THE WAY. PRESUMABLY, AT A MINIMUM, WE WOULD LIKE TO ASSURE THAT THE NEW PRESIDENT IS NOT HOSTILE TO USG INTERESTS.

¶19. UP TO THIS POINT, EMBASSY HAS ANSWERED INQUIRIES BY AVOIDING NAMES AND SAYING THAT WE HOPE A NEW PRESIDENT WILL FIT A CERTAIN PROFILE: HE/SHE SHOULD BE DEDICATED TO FINDING WAYS TO RECONCILE THE VARIOUS LEBANESE COMMUNITIES WITH EACH OTHER AND WITH THE NEEDS OF THE COMING ERA OF PEACE. HE/SHE SHOULD HAVE CREDIBILITY WITH ALL SIDES, AND IN THIS SENSE SHOULD NOT BE SEEN AS OVERLY TIED TO ANY FOREIGN SPONSOR. HE/SHE SHOULD ALSO VIEW AS A PRINCIPAL TASK ENCOURAGING THE MARONITES TOWARD MORE ACTIVE, POSITIVE PARTICIPATION IN FORMAL LEBANESE POLITICAL LIFE. IF THE TREND TOWARD CHRISTIAN NON-PARTICIPATION CONTINUES OR DEEPENS, THE PROSPECTS FOR INTERNAL RECONCILIATION AND STABILITY--WITHIN AND PERHAPS EVEN BEYOND LEBANON'S BORDERS--ARE POOR.

SCHLICHER